

[John Davis]

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1 Conn. 1938-9 [Davis -?]

John Davis:

"I've heard my old man tell about the old country—and that goes back a good many years, because I's no chicken—I's seventy two. My old man used to sit around by the stove, when he got too old to work, and tell about old times, when he was a kid over in the old country. He said they used to make a good many knives in the houses, the knifemakers in England. They'd do the work piecework. Take it home from the factory and do it. Have their wives help out and their kids. The old man was always complaining that the wives in this country had things too easy. He said they didn't know what it was to do a day's work. He said along about Christmas time, when they wanted some extra money, the whole family used to pitch in with the work, and his mother, he said, used to do her housework all day long, cook and wash and iron, and then at night she'd go work cleaning or polishing knife blades for his father. My mother told the old man, she said, if you ever bring home anything from the factory for me to do, she said, I'll chase you right back with it. You're not in the old country now, she said.

"He started to teach me the trade, the old man did, but I never stuck to it, I went to work in the clock shop after a few years of it. But I can remember the old johnnies well. They were a funny bunch. They had a couple of blade forgers down here at the Thomaston Knife company one time—I'll always remember this—they were havin' trouble hardenin' the steel, and they blamed it on the water. They said the water over in the old country was better for the purpose. The water in America wasn't so good, for some reason or other. Can you beat that for stubbornness?

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“One thing they never found any fault with was American liquor. That's the reason none of them ever saved any money, and my old man was no different from 2 the rest. He died poor. Up in Northfield, the Catlins got hold of the company because the old johnnies couldn't let the booze alone. No other reason. No other reason in the world. They started off up there, every man jack of them had stock in the company. They elected their own officers, and everything, and they were goin' to run the company for the benefit of the workers. Way ahead of their time, that's what they were. But the Catlins were a damn sight too smart for them. They saw money bein' made, and they worked into it before the knifemakers knew what was goin' on. The way I always heard it, Old Man Catlin, the one that owned the grocery store, used to sell 'em all the liquor they could hold and when they ran out of money, they'd swap their stock in the company for more liquor.

“Some Yankee farmers got ahold of the company over in Hotchkissville, too. Cowles or something like that, was their name. They had great noses for money, the old Yankees. I remember old man Bradley, he came to this town years ago, and he opened a little market over here on the East Side, and he had a horse and wagon—used to go around peddlin' fish. Well, from the day he came to the day he died, I never saw him look any different. He never got dressed up and he never went anywhere, but he left plenty of money when he went. Worked all his life and never spent a dime. All he thought of was pilin' it up. And his son got to be First Selectman. He left plenty when he died, too, but he was a different type from the old man. Liked to dress, wear spats and everything—well you remember him. But speakin' about knifemakers—there was an old lad named Fox used to come to town meetin'—regular old johnny bull—and he was a thorn in Bradley's side. He used to heckle him every time. He was always tryin' to get the town to put in new street lights or somethin' of the kind down at the Bridge, and seemed like Bradley was always against him. Every time it happened old Fox would get up and make the same speech. Tell about how Bradley was brought up without any frills 3 by his old man, and used to live in the poorer neighborhoods, but now he was “mayor” and he was settin' himself above other people, and all that. He used to always say somethin' about Bradley's spats. And Bradley

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would be boilin' mad, but he'd have to laugh because everybody else'd be laughin'. And he always wound up the same way. "Why, I remember when your old man used to peddle fish over on the East Side," he'd say. "You weren't so high and might in those days."

"Town meetin's used to be lively then, compared to what they are now. They ought to have a few more like old Fox, and Jimmy Green, and old Bob Innes. Old Bob and John Swanson are about the only ones left, and Bob is gettin' so deaf he don't hear what's goin' on any more."